

The Chronicle of Higher Education

Monday, April 6, 2009

Phoenix

Community Colleges Anticipate Boom in Baby-Boomer Students

By ERIC HOOVER

Baby boomers once redefined youth—and now they are redefining retirement.

Health-care advances and increasing life spans have allowed adults who are 50 and older to stay in the work force longer than their parents did. A tough economy means that many older Americans must continue working out of necessity, if not by choice. And many baby boomers who leave the work force seek opportunities to stay active and engaged in their communities.

Those circumstances will have major implications for community colleges, according to experts here at the annual convention of the American Association of Community Colleges. On Sunday, Mary Sue Vickers, director of the association's [Plus 50 Initiative](#), told her colleagues that community colleges must do more to engage older students and prepare them for jobs.

"Society's ideas about aging have not kept pace with reality or with how baby boomers see themselves," Ms. Vickers said. Many middle-aged Americans, she noted, may work part time after retiring, while others will continue "cycling in and out of periods of work and leisure."

The Plus 50 Initiative is a three-year project designed to create and support programs for adults over 50 at 15 community colleges. As part of the project, the association sponsored a recent survey of programs for students in that age group at the nation's community colleges. It found that 84 percent of the colleges had offerings specifically for older students.

Yet the survey revealed that while 86 percent of those institutions offered enrichment programs for older students, only 58 percent had work-force training and career-development services tailored to them. "The focus on enrichment may be the result of an outdated stereotype of the 'older learner' as a senior citizen who attends college to fill idle days during retirement," the report said. "With this inaccurate and stereotypical image of plus-50 students, a college is likely to focus on noncredit, personal-interest courses that are taken purely as a form of enjoyment."

Recent statistics suggest that that image of adult students may change over the next decade. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that from 2006 to 2016, the number of workers ages 55 to 64 will increase by 36.5 percent, while the number of workers who are 65 and older will increase by 81 percent.

"The demand for plus-50 programs is for training and retraining," Ms. Vickers said.

Expanding a community college's offerings is one thing, but marketing those offerings to potential students is another. "'Please tell your friends about us' is not a marketing strategy," said Teresa Love, outreach coordinator for the Boomers Program at Richland College, in Dallas. She

advised institutions to remember that baby boomers are diverse. Those with grandchildren, for instance, may have different needs than those with children who still live at home.

Therefore, understanding each subgroup of students over 50 is important.

So, too, are the faces a baby boomer sees in a college's marketing materials. "Imaging is very powerful," Ms. Love said. A photo of an 18-year-old on a brochure, she warned, was not the way to recruit a student who is decades older.